Slavery, Dispossession, Selfhood: Women in Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*

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Abstract:
Many African American writers still continue to write about slavery and slave experience though many years have passed since the time of its abolition. They create neo-slave narratives mixing real accounts and imaginative fiction. This attempt can be seen as an effort to reclaim a history which has been subdued by the white Europeans. Female writers like Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison have written novels with the historical context of slavery making female the protagonist. By doing so a non-entity, a historical subaltern subject is given an identity and voice allowing her to relate her experience which is often overshadowed in the works of male African American writers. This paper focuses on the women characters in Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*, which traces the trajectory from slavery, American Civil war (1961-65) to the reconstruction era. It intends to discuss the themes of sexuality, motherhood and family in the context of slavery present in the novel.

Key words: Slavery, Neo-slave narratives, women, subaltern, identity.

The Subaltern Studies focuses on ‘history from below’ giving representation to the subalterns who have always remained as non-entity, living at the very fringe of the society. In common parlance, we often associate subaltern with marginalized or marginality, but technically, the term ‘subaltern’ is implied to one who is further marginalized within a marginalized group. They are completely silenced and pushed back to an unacknowledged periphery. Many writers have attempted in representing the subaltern in their literary texts, but the question of whether the subaltern can really speak remains unanswered, for it is the non-subaltern authors who write on behalf of the subalterns and not the subalterns for themselves. Another important question is—Can these writers completely feel the experiences of a subaltern till they have not undergone the same experience? And, whether one can still consider the subalterns as subalterns, when they write bringing themselves to the center often becomes a point of debate for many critics.

This paper will bring into focus the historical subaltern subject of slave women in Southern America through the analysis of *Jubilee*, a historical novel written by the female black writer Margaret Walker. Many slave narratives were published in the 19th century after the abolition of slavery in America. These are personal and autobiographical accounts of the fugitive slaves and ex-slaves who escaped to North America for freedom. They form vital historical records on the slavery system as they are first hand testimonies of the slaves, not ‘created’ history of the whites. Surely, this genre can be seen as subversion to the plantation romances such as George Tucker’s *The Valley of the Shenandoah* (1824) and John Pendleton Kennedy’s
Swallow Barn (1832) where the southern white authors projected ‘romanticized’ and ‘idealized’ picture of the southern plantations. The white plantocrats and slave owners were projected as ‘benevolent’ masters and slaves as ‘contented’ slaves. In defending the lifestyle and tradition of the plantation, these romances provided a defensive shield to the system of slavery on which the plantation was based. The slave narratives counter these master narratives, as the slaves relate their individual as well as the fellow-slaves’ experiences exposing the physical and psychological violence inflicted on them by their white masters. In Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: an American Slave (1845), one of the earliest ones, ex-slave Frederick Douglass celebrates his African heritage. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) by Harriet Jacobs, is another important slave narrative on racial discrimination and prejudice. Invariably, they are written mainly aiming at the white audience compelling them for a retrospection of their racist attitude.

Even in the 20th century, African American writers continue to write about slavery and slave experience from a time and space where slavery system no longer exists but the hangover of the oppression still persists. The new writings, fusing real accounts and imaginative fiction, came to be termed as “neo-slave narratives”. According to Valerie Smith’s essay “Neo-slave Narratives”, the term emerged for the first time in Bernard W. Bell’s 1987 texts The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition where Bell described “neo-slave narratives” as “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage” (168). In his essay, “Neo-slave narratives”, Valerie Smith says: [These writers] approach the institution of slavery from a myriad perspectives and embrace variety of styles of writing: from realist novels grounded in historical research to speculative fiction, postmodern experiments, satire, and works that combine these diverse modes. Their differences notwithstanding, these texts illustrate the centrality of the history and the memory of slavery to our individual, racial, gender, cultural and national identities (168).

Angelyn Mitchell in her text The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction, proposes the term ‘liberatory narrative’ over ‘neo-slave narrative’. By liberatory narrative, she refers to contemporary texts written by African American women in particular, who she affirms, have been at the vanguard in revisiting slavery.

The temporal distancing allows the writers to perform a dual role of an insider as well as an outsider providing a more objective, analytical and critical insight to the stark racism still prevailing in America. The Great American Dream which ensured to give equal opportunities to every Americans irrespective of one’s class and race was not extended to the African Americans. However, in the midst of all the racial politics, the whole issue of black women rights and identity has often been neglected by the male African American writers. Margaret Walker’s Jubilee (1966) is the earliest of neo-slave narratives written by a black woman writer in the 20th century which shows the life of a black woman in
slavery thereby making a subaltern subject the fulcrum of its narration. In an interview, Walker reveals that in her story about the female protagonist Vyry, she “incorporated actual historical events into fictionalized life of her maternal great-grandmother, Margaret Duggans, from slavery to the Reconstruction” (Walker and Graham 59). Jubilee is created by the fictionalization of the oral history of Walker’s great grandmother, narrated by her grandmother during her childhood, and Walker’s thirty years of research on slavery. Walker is of the opinion that, “…more people will read a story than will read the actual history books… And, therefore, the novelist, as a social historian, has a job to do that the historian cannot do” (Walker and Graham 79). Thus, Jubilee is a historical novel which shows the trajectory from the “Antebellum period”, “American Civil War” (1861-65) to the “Reconstruction Era”.

Jubilee gives the story of a mulatto slave Vyry, from her birth to her womanhood and consequently from bondage to freedom. Vyry’s life is projected in parallel with the political developments taking place in America when anti-slavery movement was slowly gaining its momentum. Thus, the text is divided into three parts:

I- **Sis Hetta’s Child- The Antebellum Years:** It deals with the birth of Vyry and her growing up as a slave in the Big House. It shows the glorious years of the southern plantation owners flourishing on slavery alongside the violence of slavery.

II- **“Mine Eyes have seen the Glory”- The Civil War Years:** This part mostly talks about the development of war fought between the Confederates of the south and the Union Army of the north. The war starts off with staunch faith and patriotism of the south and ends with the plantation owners losing not only their slaves and plantations but also the lives of many young men. The northern army plunders the wealth of the southerners. Days of glory ends in the Big House with the deaths of “Marster”, his wife “Big Missy Salina”, the son John and the son-in-law Kevin and madness of Lillian.

III- **“Forty years in the wilderness”- Reconstruction and Reaction:** This part relates the events after the post war- the reconstruction, the violence of the Ku Klux Klan and Vyry’s attempt to survive in an antagonistic white society.

A black woman slave faces triple jeopardy due to the oppressive force of slavery, race and gender. By making a female slave the protagonist of the novel, Walker moves this subaltern subject from the periphery to the center unlike those texts of the white writers as well as the black male writer which reduce them into a non-entity or neglects their presence. Walker shows her

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1 The Ku Klux Klan was a militant group formed by the southern whites, dressed in all whites, to protest against the slave abolition by resorting to violence against the ex-slaves during the Civil War.
sensitivity towards the themes of female sexuality, motherhood and dispossession to highlight not just the sufferings of female slaves but also exhibit the strength of black woman.

The idea of possession did not exist for the slaves as they were denied of any kind of ownership starting from their body. They were dispossessed entity meant to be used and abused as chattels by their white masters. Episodes of tyranny of the overseer Grimes on the slaves of the plantation exposes the atrocity of slavery. One’s gender didn’t serve as shields to the cruelty of the masters. Lucy is branded with an "R" (runaway) on her face by Grimes after a failed attempt of escape. Eventually despite the punishments she succeeded in outbidding the blood thirsty hounds and men sent by Grimes and earns her freedom. She represents those strong female slaves who made successful bids to freedom.

The notion of claiming relationships with the family members was nothing but wishful thinking on their part. Thus, the female mothers were dispossessed of their own children. Sis Hetta died at the age of 29, a fact which could not be actually verified, after having given birth to fifteen slave children. Slave women were reduced to producers of slave children on whom they had no claims. Sis Hetta was led to her deathbed due to childbirth, a duty which was mandatory for a female slave. But she didn’t want to die without seeing her child Vyry. She was already two years old, in the custody of a surrogate mother because of the constraints of plantation life. Jubilee projects the suffering of separation from their families and loved ones from the perspective of the female slave. The female slaves are either separated from their mothers, husbands or children. Vyry is not allowed to unite with her husband Randall Ware, a free African American. Though she waited for her husband, the circumstances of the reconstruction period forced her to marry Innis Brown. Aunt Sally in Jubilee almost goes insane after her sons were sold. There is another female slave Caline though older than Sis Hetta never bred children like her.

Caline had no children. She had never known why. Maybe it was something Old Master made them do to her when she was a young girl and first started working in the Big House. May be it was the salt peter. Anyway, Caline was glad. Slaves were better off, like herself, when they had no children to be sold away, to die, and to keep on having till they killed you, like Hetta was dying now (Walker 4).

The female body not only becomes the site for violence and exploitation but also becomes an object for sexual abuse by their masters. Vyry is a result of the sexual abuse of her slave mother Hetta by Marster John Morris Dutton, never claimed as a daughter but treated as just another slave girl. Like Vyry, there were many other mullato slaves who met the same fate. To be born as a female for slaves was meant to be born as an object for sexual gratification of the masters. Hetta’s marriage to Jake was just a nominal marriage. She was constantly abused by her master thus reducing her merely to a sexual commodity. “[When] she was barely more than a pickaninny” (Walker 8), she was gifted to John Dutton, still in his teens, by his father. “It was all his father’s fault. Anyway it was his father
who taught him it was better for a young man of quality to learn life by breaking in a young nigger wench than it was for him to spoil a pure white virgin girl. And he had wanted Hetta, so his father gave her to him, and he had satisfied his lust with her (Walker 8-9). Caline and Sis Hetta represent those girl slaves who had been sexually exploited from a very tender age. Such gruesome horrific reality is unveiled through this novel which otherwise remained untouched in the writings of male black writers and hushed in the plantation romances.

The figure of a strong black mother often used by African American woman writers in their fiction is also found in *Jubilee*. Vyry does not run away leaving behind her two children despite Randall Ware’s assurance of getting their children back. Instead, she took the risk of being caught and bearing the consequences, and dared to run away carrying both children with her. Moreover, even after the abolition of the slavery system, despite all the ill-treatments she has been receiving since her childhood in the Big House, Vyry does not abandon her young mistress who is completely shattered after the three deaths of her brother, husband and mother . Also, she proves to be wiser and more sensible than Innis Brown, her second husband in many instances. Having figured out the hidden motive of the white landlord, she persuades her husband to leave the place and search for a new one. Her courage can be seen through her constant struggle for survival of her family. Taking advantage of her fair skin, she works in a white community as a mid-wife and succeeds in buying the confidence of the whites over the blacks, thereby destroying their racial prejudice to a great extent. It is also Vyry and not Innis Brown who acknowledges the importance of education for her children and dreams that her children get admission in the school.

When actual family had ceased to exist, the slaves developed a kind of kinship among themselves not just owing to their common African heritage but more because of their common experience as slaves. They depended on each other for moral support and this brought a sense of unity among them. Even though the community was unstable with slaves being bought and sold constantly, they were able to develop quasi-familial relationships. This communal spirit of the slaves is exhibited in the very opening of *Jubilee* when all the slaves, especially the women gather to support and pray for Sis Hetta who is dying. The happiness, sorrow, pain and anguish of the slaves which are otherwise kept suppressed find expression in the form of songs, dance and music. In fact, spirituals, a prominent style of Southern slave music is recognized as the first form of African American music. According to *Encyclopedia of African American Music*,

[Spirituals] provide the most vivid documentation of slavery in the South...

Spirituals are unique because they capture the individual as well as communal aspects of Southern slave culture and demonstrate authenticity, ingenuity, and creativity. Spirituals functioned as worship songs, songs of escape, songs that provided comfort, and songs that recorded the lives of slaves. The lyrical content of spirituals provides the most vivid and creative
Margaret Walker incorporates these songs and hymns in her narration to reproduce the oral heritage passed down by her grandmother Elvira Ware Dozier. *Jubilee* starts with a traditional Negro spiritual and the very title *Jubilee* points to the significance of spirituals. Songs are present throughout the text and they also form the epigraph of each chapter. Spirituals were sung primarily during communal worship and celebration, a direct connection to scriptures from the Old Testament and New Testament. They provide the slaves hope and a medium for resistance. In *Jubilee* the slaves always talk about Moses who will deliver them from slavery and finally they refer to Abraham Lincoln as their Moses. Spirituals form an oral record of personal experiences. For Aunt Sally, though a very quiet character, songs give articulation to all her suppressed emotions. When her sons are sold off by Big Missy, she voices her protest through these songs. Thinking her to be going insane, Big Missy sells her off too like her sons. Having learnt this art of singing from Aunt Sally, Vyry is also found singing in various incidents when she faces the wrath of her masters.

Margaret Walker does not limit her scope by talking just about the plight of female slaves but she also take up issues which were very central to the problems of the slavery system like the idea of identity, naming, family, violence, and community. Walker also gives a detailed account of the political scenario of the time, the tension building up between South and North of America due to their antagonistic attitudes towards slavery. The violence of the Ku Klux Klan on the freed slaves is also depicted in the text. She wrote this neo-slave narrative in the twentieth century when slavery had already been abolished a century ago. But the condition of the blacks had not much improved in America. They were not treated as equals by the whites and still remained to be the marginalized section segregated in the ghettos. The twentieth century was the age of black uprisings and it produced many great leaders like Martin Luther King who came in the forefront and led the Civil Right Movement (1955-1968) fighting for political and economical rights in a non-violent way. Though written with the historical backdrop of the slavery system, *Jubilee* is a product of such political circumstances. The struggle of the African Americans is reflected through the struggle of the slaves in the texts. The two struggles cannot be treated separately but should be viewed as one for they show the long history of oppression and struggle of the black community in America.

Nonetheless, Margaret Walker does not leave her readers in disillusionment by providing a pessimistic closure to her novel. Rather *Jubilee* ends with a hope of regeneration and reconstruction. She seems to suggest education as one of the main remedies to the problems of the ex-slaves. Thus, the concluding part of the novel stretches upon education issues of not just the blacks but also the whites. Finally, Vyry's dream of giving education to Jim gets fulfilled with Randall Ware’s arrival. Also the text somehow seems to suggest a kind acceptance of the blacks by the white society. The white neighbors of Vyry overcome their racial prejudice and help in
rebuilding the house which was burned down by the Ku Klux Clan. Thus, Margaret Walker is not projecting a separatist ideology but envisioning an egalitarian society.

Texts like *Jubilee* act as a link between the present and the past for the African Americans. The history of the slaves is kept alive through these neo-slave narratives but here through the perspective of the subaltern space of female slaves. With the historical backdrop of slavery, the protagonist Vyry’s life is narrated, her journey from bondage to freedom and dispossession to selfhood. *Jubilee* can be seen as a specimen “écriture feminine” of Helen Cixous, as the experience of female slavery is written from the perspective of female slave by a female black writer. The convention of history is challenged and subverted by such texts as they offer an alternate history by voicing the grievances and pain of the silenced voices which otherwise are subdued in the history written by the white mainstream.

**Bibliography**


